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FEATURED

## City leaders get input ahead of new stormwater fee proposition

By Joy Hampton Senior Staff Writer 23 hrs ago



Kyle Phillips / The Transcript

This file photo shows where flood waters crossed the road at Woodcrest Creek Drive in the Vineyard addition after heavy rains fell in Norman. Norman city leaders continue to look at ways to pay for stormwater expenses.



Norman city leaders are looking at ways to pay for stormwater costs from street sweeping to storm drain maintenance to more inspectors on construction sites.

Funding sources may not be the only concern, as the city preps for another stormwater utility fee proposition.

The wide range of unfunded needs associated with stormwater has been cited as one reason voters rejected the initial stormwater utility proposal in August.

Other reasons for opposition to the stormwater proposal included high fees on rural properties, which people believed would impose an unfair burden on a segment of the population that receive few city services, the lack of offsets for investment in infrastructure such as detention ponds, and a general dislike of anything perceived to be a new tax.

"People felt like it was rushed," Council member Robert Castleberry said. "We had meetings about stormwater, but we really didn't have meetings with public input that we took as input."

Castleberry said the city presented its plan and left too many of the public's questions unanswered, but a stormwater fee is badly needed and, despite geographic and other differences, all Norman residents have a stake in dealing with stormwater and water quality.

"If you ever come to Norman, if you ever eat at a restaurant in Norman, you're drinking the water," Castleberry said. "If you drive on Norman roads that are subject to flooding, you're affected by it. You have to give consideration that we're all part of the stormwater infrastructure. We've got to pay for this somehow."

On Tuesday, the Norman City Council heard from stormwater management specialist Trey Shanks, of Freese and Nichols, on funding options.

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- **Existing city funds:** Currently, the city is funding somewhere in the vicinity of \$3 million worth of stormwater-related costs through the city's general and capital funds.

The primary revenue stream for the general fund is sales tax, a highly volatile funding source that is running below budget for the year.

The second largest revenue stream for the general fund is franchise fees paid by utility companies. Moderate weather has reduced those payments, as well.

"If we were to pay all of the needed services out of the general fund, we would have to cut other services," Castleberry said. "There's no surplus in the general fund. If we can get a dedicated revenue source for stormwater, that actually frees up money in the general fund so we can do more things."

Shanks also talked about property tax-bonded projects. The city has always intended to do large capital improvements, such as work on Imhoff Creek using a bond or some other mechanism.

The stormwater utility fee was never intended to fund large capital projects, Sturtz said.

Currently, the city is paying for drainage improvements that will eliminate McGee Drive flooding along Lindsey Street as part of the 2012 bond.

In addition to bonds for large capital projects, the city could consider a rolling bond package for smaller capital projects similar to the street maintenance bond, which must be approved every five years.

Such a bond would require voter approval, but for a small addition to Norman property taxes, the city could set up a prioritized system for dealing with smaller capital projects, rather than funding them through a utility fee, Shanks said.

- **Stormwater impact fee:** The city could enact a stormwater impact fee without a vote of the populace to impose a fee on new development.

The one-time payment would offset a portion of expanded storm system costs from development and would require a city cost share, Shanks said.

"I would say we already have one," Castleberry said. "Every time a developer develops a subdivision, they have to put in all of the infrastructure to deal with stormwater."

New neighborhoods and commercial developments are required to build detention ponds and other stormwater infrastructure and to set up a mechanism to maintain those structures, he said.

"We already have fairly high impact fees," Mayor Lynne Miller said. "They put in all the drainage and the pipes and the roads already. Development already pays a lot of the cost of original capital expenditure."

- **Grants and loans:** More funding is becoming available through state and federal programs to provide money for stormwater, but those funds are limited and very competitive, Public Works Director Shawn O'Leary said.

Norman is applying for a stormwater grant, but even if the city is successful, grants tend to be one-time funding sources and require a city cost share.

- **Special districts:** A special improvement district can be created to make capital improvements in targeted areas. Those are usually initiated by property owner petition or city council resolution. In this case, affected land owners could agree to a special assessment.

"You identify the improvement that could be made and then you assess those properties," City Attorney Jeff Bryant said. "There are different ways to determine how properties are being benefited based on the type of improvement. It's not a one size fits all."

Bryant said these districts are usually billed and collected by the city, so it differs from property taxes.

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• **Public-private partnerships:** Partnerships with invested private stakeholders can be helpful but require cooperative participation agreements. These types of opportunities are typically for capital improvements in targeted areas, Shanks said, and require a city cost share.

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